

VZCZCXRO3183
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDF RUEHDH RUEHIK RUEHKUK RUEHLZ RUEHROV
RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0493/01 1201203
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 301203Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4789
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3716
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3913
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000493

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL
OVP FOR MUSTAFA
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SIDON PARLIAMENTARY RACE SYMBOLIC FOR
BOTH SIDES

REF: A. BEIRUT 00485
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 00482
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 00200

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Pollsters expect the March 14 Sidon parliamentary slate of Minister of Education Bahia Hariri and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to defeat opposition candidate Ossama Saad, but the race between Siniora and Saad will be close. Although only one seat is being contested in Sidon, the victor will gain a much larger symbolic boost, as 2009 elections are the first without a pre-arranged Bahia Hariri-Ossama Saad joint ticket in the district. Additionally, the city's status as the largest city in southern Lebanon and a key Sunni stronghold brings significance for both sides.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Several factors benefit each candidate in the race. Siniora is an inexperienced campaigner, but March 14 financing will bolster his electoral efforts. Siniora is a national political heavyweight, but Ossama Saad has a strong local following that will support him at the polls. The opposition also will play up Siniora's links to his Christian March 14 allies, who are reportedly disliked in the Sunni city. Security remains a key concern for election day, as Sidon is a transit point for all voters traveling to southern districts to cast their ballots. End summary.

NARROW VICTORY FOR FUTURE EXPECTED

[1](#)3. (SBU) March 14 contacts and independent pollsters expect the March 14 Sidon ticket of Minister of Education Bahia Hariri and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to win over Nasserite Popular Organization (opposition) candidate Ossama Saad, but all expect a tight race. The last elections held in Sidon, 2005 municipal elections, saw a 61 percent voter turnout, and about the same (32-33,000 people) is expected for the upcoming parliamentary election. Five to nine percent of registered voters in Sidon are naturalized Palestinians, according to the city's mayor.

IMPORTANT FOR HARIRI...

14. (SBU) Theories abound as to why, and how willingly, Prime Minister Siniora threw his hat into the 2009 electoral race in Sidon, but the tight electoral race country-wide makes both Sidon seats important to ensure March 14 victory. Siniora told the Ambassador April 27 he had not intended to run for parliament, but circumstances made it "imperative" that he do so (Ref A). Contacts point to Future Party leader Saad Hariri's desire to reaffirm his role as the unrivaled leader of Lebanon's Sunnis, especially after giving concessions to his Sunni rivals in Tripoli -- the country's other Sunni stronghold -- by forming a combined list. Opposition mayor of Sidon Abed Bizri (a March 8 "independent") noted that former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri lost Sidon's last municipal elections in 2005, despite "political activism" -- paying funds and providing services -- before the vote. Sidon's residents see Siniora as a tool of Saad Hariri's, he said.

15. (SBU) Other arguments center on Saad Hariri's intention to maintain "control" of Lebanon's premiership. Contacts, including independent pollster Jawad Adra, speculate that Saad Hariri cannot become prime minister as long as he accuses Syria of killing his father. A Future Party sweep in Sidon would reinforce Saad Hariri's authority over the Sunni community and possibly allow him to insist on who the next prime minister will be.

16. (SBU) Additionally, some say a solid hold on the Sunni population could enable Hariri to wield an unofficial

BEIRUT 00000493 002 OF 003

sectarian "veto" in government decisions, in the event of an opposition majority. Similar to the November 2006 decision of the Shia ministers to stage a walk-out of cabinet and freeze government operations, Hariri -- as reaffirmed representative of the Sunni sect -- could insist that government decisions have his stamp of approval.

BUT SYMBOLIC FOR OPPOSITION AS WELL

17. (SBU) Internal Security Forces (ISF) Director General Ashraf Rifi argued that Sidon, as the northernmost point of Lebanon's mostly Shia south, also is a symbol for the opposition. Although the city is predominantly Sunni, it is the largest city in southern Lebanon. An opposition defeat there would weaken "the gate" that opens to the rest of its southern stronghold, he emphasized to Ambassador in a recent conversation.

CAMPAIGN EXPERIENCE, STATURE, AND MONEY

18. (SBU) Fouad Siniora and Ossama Saad are both relative campaign rookies, but financial and electoral backing from the Hariri family will benefit the Prime Minister. Siniora's stature as Prime Minister will work in his favor, but Ossama Saad has a strong local following that could make the battle difficult for Siniora. Ossama Saad, who won seats in 2000 and 2005 running virtually unopposed, is feeling nervous about his first "real" race for his seat, mayor and Ossama Saad advisor Bizri told us.

19. (SBU) Ossama Saad has already sought to highlight Siniora's campaign mistakes. Aware of Siniora's usual security precautions, Ossama Saad's backers in early April were waiting when Siniora's security detail -- including dogs -- entered a mosque in Sidon before a campaign event. Ossama Saad provided the video to local news sources, who promptly broadcast Siniora's insult to Islam. When Siniora's security team -- wiser to the media danger the dogs presented -- searched a Sidon church before a similar campaign event without the animals, Ossama Saad publicly noted the

difference with which Siniora treated the two religions.

PLAYING UP OR DOWN LINKS WITH MARCH 14

¶10. (SBU) The opposition's political strategy will focus on the absence of ties between Siniora and his mother city and highlight Siniora's membership in the broader March 14 alliance. According to Mayor Bizri, some Sidon residents are still missing relatives kidnapped by March 14 Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces (LF) during the civil war, so playing up links between Siniora and his Christian allies will benefit the opposition.

¶11. (SBU) The opposition also will highlight the relative "accessibility" of the candidates, with Ossama Saad depicting himself as the most accessible to Sidon residents. Fellow Future Party candidate Education Minister Bahia Hariri consistently has provided services in Sidon and was very active in maintaining calm in Ain-el-Hilweh during the January fighting in Gaza. However, Siniora has admitted that he is starting from behind in terms of local outreach (Ref B). He, however, is working to make up lost time and, in an April 27 meeting with the Ambassador, highlighted his public outreach in Sidon and enumerated his many development projects in the area.

¶12. (SBU) Education Minister Bahia Hariri has told us her strategy will minimize links with March 14 and instead highlight Future Movement's, and her personal, involvement in the city. Siniora, on the other hand, who was chosen as Prime Minister by a majority March 14 government, will have more difficulty distinguishing himself from the March 14 coalition.

BEIRUT 00000493 003 OF 003

ROLE OF JEMAA ISLAMIYA

¶13. (SBU) Although Jemaa Islamiya (JI) in previous elections has allied with Hariri's Future Movement, the two sides thus far have failed to reach an agreement regarding 2009 parliamentary elections. According to Nader Hariri, Saad Hariri's cousin and advisor, JI insisted on two seats on Future's lists, and Future would only agree to one. JI said publicly it would not oppose Hariri by running on Saad's list in Sidon, but the group could instruct followers to abstain from voting on June 7. Contacts differ on how significant JI support in Sidon is for a Hariri-Siniora victory.

CONCERNS ABOUT VIOLENCE

¶14. (SBU) ISF Director General Rifi expressed concern that Sidon's position as an entry to southern Lebanon could make it vulnerable to incidents of violence. The city is a chokepoint for all Lebanese who will travel to southern districts to vote on June 7. Additionally, an April 28 UNIFIL assessment noted Siniora's candidacy in Sidon has angered Hizballah and the group had warned against "security repercussions." Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who is from southern Lebanon, also worried that Siniora's candidacy would spark violence in the volatile area around Sidon (Ref C). However, Defense Minister Elias Murr told Ambassador April 30 that he had redeployed all eleven LAF brigades in advance of the June 7 election, and had also redeployed the five LAF command battalions. Murr also reported he had sent one brigade (headed by a Sunni) and two commando battalions as back-up for Sidon.

SISON